

Dispatches from the Lamb's War (e-mail message, Oct. 28, 2008)

Dear Friend,

In response to your query:

Is the Peace Testimony a relevant part of Quaker life today?

I'd like to offer the following thoughts, which have arisen from prayerful consideration and my experience until now:

My understanding is that "The Peace Testimony" is only a way that Friends have in recent decades come to describe something much more deeply rooted in Friends religious experience—namely, our testimony to our experience of the work in our own hearts of the Inward Christ, the Inner Light, our Teacher and Guide (by whatever name). Lloyd Lee Wilson, in his book *Essays on the Quaker Vision of Gospel Order*, includes an essay with the title "On Remembering Why They Are Called Testimonies." His words speak much more deeply to this than I have here.

When we confront injustice, when we engage in Spirit-led service, when we speak prophetically to the condition of the world we live in and witness to the world we know is possible (and already here among us), when we are instruments of the Spirit for reconciliation, healing, and mutual understanding, we are testifying to the Truth through our experience of that Life and Love and Power that takes away the occasion for all war. That is remaking the world in far more effective ways than we can through our anger, grief, passion, and social action—no matter how well-intentioned.

I have no doubt that this Spirit leads us into prophetic witness and that this often means that we are involved politically as part of political movements, seeking to influence political decisions, or even supporting (to some extent) the work or agendas of political parties. But we go astray when we mistake the cause, or the ideology, or the party, or the idol of "effectiveness" for the real issue our own journey toward and into the Spirit that is supremely effective.

I am saddened when the words Friends speak in meeting do not arise, at least as far as my Inward Witness discerns, from the promptings of the Spirit among us, for the sustenance, uplifting, and encouragement of the meeting as a whole on our individual and corporate journeys. But even these kinds of messages are opportunities to listen more deeply to the ways that I can center down more deeply, listen for God's voice, and follow my experience of Divine Wisdom wherever She leads.

A Friend who has been a mentor and elder to me on my own journey once shared with me the counsel "Get thee to God, before you get thee to the World."

Not "Don't get thee to the World." But ground yourself (myself) in the Presence of the

Spirit in whom we live, and move, and have our being, to truly seek, through our speech and actions, to bring all into the more perfect, more whole expression of what early Friends (and Conservative Friends, and others today) call Gospel Order—a universe, including social, political, and economic relationships—that model what God intends for all of us. A world in living relationships of Love, Truth, and Justice. The key, as I’ve come to understand it, is that if we are pursuing our own vision of justice or peace through our own ego, anger, and confusion, we’re less likely to truly be midwives for the inbreaking of Divine Love into our world. But if we honestly and patiently allow ourselves to be led, as imperfectly as we can understand those leadings, and if we follow faithfully, we can be (often in spite of ourselves) the radical agents of Love in our wounded world.

The Peace Testimony, then, is the outward sign of an inward transformation. As the Spirit does its work within us, our outward service and witness will reflect the qualities of the Inward Teacher and the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22-23). Our actions may make people uncomfortable, and may challenge them more than they’d like to be challenged. They may make people angry. But if we are faithful, our actions should not wound people. And they should not demean That of God in those with whom we disagree, though we may disagree mightily. If we’re doing that (wounding or demeaning), even out of justified frustration, outrage, and confusion, we’re not Testifying as clearly as we might. If we do this faithfully, it won’t be merely about vigils, rallies, banners, and bumper stickers. These are, in the words of an early Friend, a “Silly Poor Gospel,” if this takes the place of radical, Spirit-led, and loving testimony in and among our brothers and sisters and neighbors. I don’t want to limit an expression of all-encompassing Divine Love to an Obama for President bumper sticker or a Bush Lied, People Died sign. Walter Brueggemann, in his book *The Prophetic Imagination*, gives a useful description of what a prophetic witness might look like, beyond a simple challenge to or condemnation of the powers that be. A key element is a call to a future more in keeping with the promise of the Spirit—a world of love, justice, reconciliation, and healing.

My own experience of activism, in its secular forms, is that it is often something that pulls people away from a focus on and faithfulness to the leadings of the Spirit. The Catholic mystic and prophet Thomas Merton, in what has been called his “Letter to a Young Activist,” might seem to agree (I carry that letter in my Bible and read it often, when I’m in deep need of reminders about this).

Altruism and a dedication to “saving the world” have in my own experience sprung more from anger (outrage) and sorrow (grief) than from Love. When I or others start from a place of activism (which I take to mean the imperative to “do something,” to make our opposition to injustice known, to fight against the hatred and pain and suffering and ignorance and fear that seems to run unchallenged through much of our world), we tread on dangerous ground. We can make it very difficult for the Spirit to lead us, and we can do damage to ourselves and others in many ways. This certainly has happened in meetings with which I’ve been connected and in my own life. In our struggle for “positive social change,” we can alienate others, in fact making it more difficult for them

to respond to leadings that might invite them into partnership with us and with God in nurturing a renewed world.

The answer isn't to withdraw into spiritual, contemplative enclaves in which the pain of our selves and our neighbors can be ignored. It isn't to convince ourselves that we should avoid conflict in the name of not upsetting anyone, or to protect ourselves from the very real spectre of burnout or the pain of our perceived powerlessness or failure. Instead, the answer is to center down, to (in the words of George Fox) stand still in the Light until we have a clear sense that, because we are loved and are steeped in the love of God and our community, we can act out of Love, in testimony to our experience of the movement of the Spirit in our hearts and in the world. This doesn't mean we have to wait to be perfect to act in the world—far from it. But if we can give up control and surrender in small and large ways to first knowing God's heart and then being God's hands in a broken world, my experience is that we may find ourselves—and the service into which we're called—transformed. We do need to be prepared. And that's worth waiting (in the Light) for, though it will have to happen in God's time, not according to our timeline. And this searching, and this waiting, and this seeking, and this listening, is profoundly relevant.

These are some of my experiences, as these issues continue to be opened to me, through a glass, darkly. I might be completely wrong, but if I am, please take these words in the Spirit in which they are intended, with humility and in friendship.

I'm grateful to you, Friend, for inviting this sharing.

I hope and pray that some of what I've shared above speaks to your condition, despite the length.

In faith, stumbling in the dark,
Noah

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